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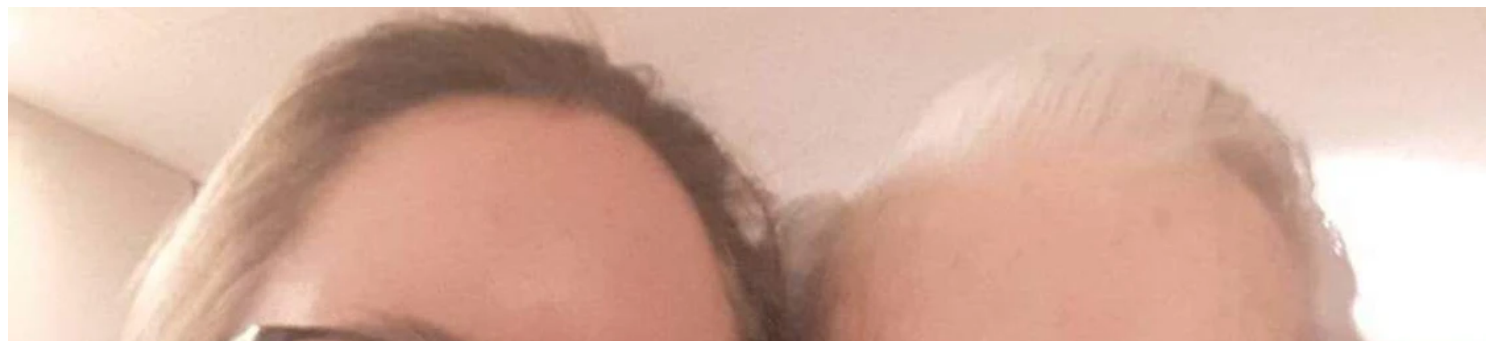
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Family caregivers will no longer be locked out of long-term care during COVID outbreaks

The new policy recognizes that caregivers — often family members who provide essential care — are crucial to the well-being of fragile long-term care residents.

Elizabeth Payne

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Emily Hladkowicz and her 90-year-old grandfather Heinz Ziebell. He lives at Carlingview Manor. PHOTO BY COURTESY EMILY HLADKOWICZ /PROVIDED

Window visits with long-term care residents — a poignant image from the early months of the pandemic — could be a thing of the past in Ontario, even during future outbreaks of COVID-19 or other illnesses.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

The provincial government has announced that designated caregivers can visit long-term care residents even during outbreaks, something individuals and organizations have long lobbied for, saying a policy of isolating residents has worsened their outcomes during the pandemic.



The new policy recognizes that caregivers — often family members who provide essential care, such as feeding and grooming — are crucial to the well-being of fragile long-term care residents. The policy also allows for paid caregivers or companions to continue to visit even during a pandemic. Each resident can designate two caregivers.

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”Bringing comfort and care, caregivers make a vital contribution to the overall well-being of long-term care residents,” Long-Term Care Minister Dr. Merrilee Fullerton said.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Allowing family caregivers inside could make a crucial difference if there is a second wave of COVID-19, family members and advocates say, as long as the policy is adhered to by individual care homes. That hasn’t been the case so far, with some homes making it difficult or impossible for caregivers to do restricted indoor or outdoor visits.

Vivian Stamatopoulos, a vocal long-term care advocate and associate teaching professor at Ontario Technical University, called the announcement an important step in the right direction, but she remained wary about whether all homes would comply.

“What still remains to be seen is whether this document is worth the paper it is written on or whether individual homes will continue to block access to family caregivers, given the lack of oversight and accountability measures levied against non-compliant homes.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

She noted some residents had suffered irreparable damage during the months of isolation from their families.

More than 1,800 long-term care residents died during the early months of the pandemic in Ontario, a rate of death in long-term care exceeding that in many comparable countries. Across Canada, more than 80 per cent of all COVID-19 deaths have been among long-term care residents.

There were reports by families and the military, which went into some Toronto-area homes and others in Quebec, of finding residents malnourished, dehydrated and neglected in understaffed, poorly equipped homes. Allowing family caregivers in during pandemics would ensure more residents are fed properly and fewer suffer from physical and mental decline, advocates say. In some homes, including in Ottawa, more than one-quarter of residents died and many more became infected.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Jane Meadus, a lawyer with the Advocacy Centre for the Elderly, said the change was necessary.

“These people have been detained in long-term care for almost six months with questionable legality. Something had to change. You cannot just detain people against their will in their homes.”

As the province has gradually reopened long-term care homes to restricted visits in recent weeks, access has been uneven and inconsistent, with some homes welcoming family and caregivers for extended visits and others left looking in from the outside even after the province recommended allowing them back in.

In a statement, the province recognized there had been inconsistency in letting family caregivers back into long-term care homes.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

“Today’s announcement will ensure that guidelines on their visits are applied consistently across homes so that all residents get the support they deserve,” Fullerton said.

The gradual re-entry into long-term care homes by family members has been both a relief and emotionally wrenching.

During much of the pandemic, only essential visitors and staff have been allowed into long-term care homes and short visits have been allowed outdoors. Those rules began to loosen in July.

Throughout that time, Stamatopoulos said she was hearing growing frustration from families who couldn’t see their loved ones despite loosening provincial rules.

“I am hearing that families are being shut out and going days without having messages returned. They are getting increasingly frustrated with the lack of communication.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

At long-term care homes run by the City of Ottawa, in contrast, enhanced indoor visits lasting two hours 45 minutes were allowed beginning last week.

“The management of the four City of Ottawa long-term care homes agree that connection and communication between residents and their loved ones is extremely important to the wellbeing and quality of life of the residents and their family members,” Shelley Kuiack, administrator of the Peter D. Clark long-term care home, wrote in a memo to families.

Diana Pepin, whose disabled mother lives at Peter D. Clark, called the extended access “unbelievable.”

“This is bringing a sense of normalcy back to our lives.”

Others with family in private long-term care homes have also been inside for more restricted visits.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Emily Hladkowicz, a researcher and PhD candidate studying aging and health, was able to visit her 90-year-old grandfather, Heinz Ziebell, inside his Carlingview Manor room for the first time since the pandemic began. Her mother Esther, a retired nurse, made a separate visit.

Emily Hladkowicz and her 90-year-old grandfather Heinz Ziebell. He lives at Carlingview Manor. PHOTO BY PHOTO COURTESY OF EMILY HLADKOWICZ

Until the pandemic, mother and daughter would visit Ziebell most days, helping to feed him and providing personal care. Since the lockdown, Emily has talked to him on the phone from the front of the Carling Avenue building 90 times while he looked on from his third-floor window. She has written the man she calls “Poppa” daily.

Carlingview Manor has been among of the worst-hit long-term care homes in Ottawa, with more than 60 resident deaths from COVID-19. Hladkowicz said the sheer volume of those deaths struck her when she entered to visit her grandfather indoors for the first time since then.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

“I stepped into that building and paused for a second. There are so many people I know there. It was a really sorrowful moment.”

The visit lasted about 45 minutes and Emily had to remain six feet from her grandfather, which was difficult in his room. But seeing him inside his home made a huge difference for both.

“He was the happiest I have seen him in five or six months.”

Esther Hladkowicz said she was relieved to get inside her father’s room to take stock of how much the isolation had affected him.

“He has declined. He has spiralled down.” She said her father, who has dementia, was obviously having a difficult time processing why she was in his room after so long.

She, like others, say essential caregivers must not be kept out of long-term care homes again even if there is another spike in COVID-19. Esther Hladkowicz has long provided grooming and foot care for her father and used her nursing experience to monitor his health.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Betty Yakimenko, who heads the family council at Madonna Care Community in Orléans, is still waiting to get inside to see her 83-year-old mother.

Just as homes across the province were beginning to crack their doors open a little to family caregivers, Madonna Care went back into lockdown after a staff member tested positive for the virus last week. Since the pandemic began, 40 residents and two staff members there have died from COVID-19. Dozens of others, including senior staff members, have become ill.

Even before the lockdown, families were not being allowed in for short-term visits, Yakimenko said.

She has been told that the home, owned by Sienna Senior Living, has increased staff and now has residents in single rooms. Madonna, which had 160 residents at the beginning of the pandemic, now has 96 because of deaths from COVID-19 and other causes, Yakimenko said.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

She has not been inside to see for herself, though. She said she and others have lost faith in the care home and say they're worried it will again have a hard time coping if cases spike.

Allowing family members in as essential caregivers could mitigate that, she said, and take pressure off harried staff members.

A spokesperson for Sienna Senior Living said in a statement that the home was "fully staffed" and preparing for the possibility of a second wave. All remaining residents are in single rooms.

Vivian Stamatopoulos of Ontario Technical University. PHOTO BY ONTARIO TECH UNIVERSITY

Stamatopoulos said it was urgent that the homes follow the guidance and allow caregivers in for unrestricted visits, especially with schools reopening.

“Everyone is aware that our second wave is pretty much going to be kick-started by the lack of effective planning on back to school. If you have unsafe schools, that is going to quickly lead to unsafe nursing homes.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

“When there is an outbreak, that is when staffing collapses further and that is when you desperately need the help of family.”

The new provincial policy says two designated caregivers can have unrestricted visiting privileges at all times, but during an outbreak can only visit individually. Visitors are required to wear masks and additional personal protective equipment during some circumstances. General visitors — those not among designated caregivers — will still be allowed in at the homes’ discretion.

Caregivers and visitors must pass active screening and must have tested negative for COVID-19 within the previous two weeks.

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